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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 003677

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV PHUM PREL KISL ASEC KPAO RP](#)

SUBJECT: COUNTING OF VOTES CONTINUES IN MUSLIM AUTONOMOUS
REGION IN MINDANAO

REF: A. OPS CENTER - MANILA 08/08/05 TELCON

- [1](#)B. MANILA 3655
- [1](#)C. MANILA 3611
- [1](#)D. MANILA 3477
- [1](#)E. MANILA 3435

[1](#)1. (U) This message is Sensitive But Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary: Officials continue to count votes cast in the August 8 Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) elections. Results are due to be released within the next 24 hours. Only minor problems have been reported during the counting phase, and the law and order situation continues to be largely peaceful so far. While the GRP has praised the conduct of the elections, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a Muslim insurgent group, has sharply criticized them. Overall, the elections appear to have gone relatively well, although the risk of fraud and violence remains. Suggested "if asked" press guidance developed by Mission is attached in Para 11. End Summary.

Counting Continues

[1](#)3. (SBU) Election officials continue to tally ballots from the August 8 ARMM elections at several centralized counting centers (see ref b). The Commission on Elections (COMELEC), an independent GRP body, is overseeing the counting process. As part of this effort, COMELEC continues to coordinate the movement of all ballots cast in Maguindinao and Lanao del Sur Provinces to counting centers located in Cotabato City, while ballots from the three island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi Tawi will be counted locally. COMELEC extended voting until noon on August 9 in some limited areas, such as Sumisip, Basilan Province, where it declared a "failure of election" due to alleged "ballot snatching" (see ref b).

[1](#)4. (SBU) So far, COMELEC has not announced results for any of the races (governor, vice governor, or the 24-member Regional Assembly). It has indicated that it plans to do so within the next 24 hours, though that timeframe may slip. COMELEC has not yet released voter turnout figures. Initial reports indicate that turnout in some ARMM areas was lower than in the 2001 elections due to heavy rains, residents being unable to leave work to go to vote, and perhaps some apathy among residents. At the same time, other areas are reporting solid turnouts. (Note: Philippine elections usually generate a high turnout: the 2001 ARMM elections had 82 percent turnout, while the May 2004 Philippine General Elections had 77 percent turnout. End Note.)

Some Reports of Irregularities

[1](#)5. (U) The elections appear to have been fairly orderly, though there were some problems. Media sources reported several isolated incidents of irregularities in voting on August 8, such as: the distribution of flyers inside precincts; "operators" for candidates handing out cash at polling places; and failure to use indelible ink to preclude double-voting.

[1](#)6. (SBU) Mission observers in the Cotabato area also witnessed some apparent irregularities and non-transparent procedures at canvassing centers they visited. Several Mission observers, for example, reported that officials hid tally sheets when they arrived at the centers. One observer saw an official apparently marking votes on a tally sheet that did not correspond to the physical counting of ballots. Additionally, another Mission observer noted that the voter turnout figures he was seeing in the counting centers he visited (more than 95 percent) were seemingly implausibly higher than what he had observed at polling places in the area on August 8.

[1](#)7. (U) Despite this clutch of seeming irregularities,

candidates generally have not yet begun to bicker over charges of fraud, though this might occur once results are announced downstream. In particular, candidates in the most high-profile race -- that for governor -- have been relatively restrained while the counting continues.

GRP Upbeat

18. (SBU) The GRP is generally upbeat about the unfolding situation. Government and military officials have praised the elections for being calm and orderly. In an August 8 press statement, President Arroyo vowed, "Whoever is elected will get the full support of the President and the national government," while Malacanang spokesman Ignacio Bunye hailed what he characterized as a "generally safe and secure" election day. COMELEC Chairman Benjamin Abalos was quoted as stating that the elections were "unusually peaceful and the cleanest and freest so far." Abalos allowed that there had been some minor problems. Brigadier General Ben Dolorfino, the head of the military task force assigned to secure the elections, confirmed that there were no reports of casualties from election-related violence, kidnappings, or terrorist acts. He noted that there had been some minor incidents involving violence (see ref b). Lanao del Sur Governor Aleem Bashier Manalao, a well-known Muslim official, commended COMELEC, the military, and the police for successfully coordinating efforts during the election timeframe.

Insurgent Group Lashes Out

19. (SBU) The insurgent group MILF has lashed out at the elections. Eid Kabalu, a MILF spokesman, said the group boycotted what he described as the "meaningless" and "fraudulent" ARMM elections. He said the MILF would rather work for "genuine" self-government. The MILF rejected the ARMM, which he said had failed to end the conflict in Mindanao. Kabalu made no remarks indicating that his group's negative view of the elections would impact the peace track with the GRP. (Note: The GRP and MILF have held eight rounds of talks. They were supposed to meet again in late July, but the meeting was postponed, apparently at the behest of the Malaysian facilitators. -- See ref e. End Note.)

Comment

110. (SBU) Overall, the elections appear to have gone relatively well, especially given the fears that there might be widespread chaos and violence. It is too soon for the GRP to pat itself on the back just yet because the risk of fraud and violence remains. For example, as noted, tensions could easily flare once results are announced and defeated candidates make the inevitable claims of fraud. The GRP -- through COMELEC and its large security force presence -- appears ready for eventualities, although inter-ethnic and clan-based relations in the ARMM are tangled and can erupt into violence quickly. Mission observation teams, which are wrapping up their efforts, appear to have helped send a strong message to residents of the ARMM that the international community remains very interested in their situation, while underscoring the need for clean elections. End Comment.

"If Asked" Press Guidance

111. (U) Mission has developed the following suggested "if asked" press guidance:

"We commend the citizens of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) for exercising their democratic rights to vote in the August 8 elections. We also commend efforts by civilian, military, and police officials to ensure a safe environment for the elections. We pledge to continue to work through the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) to strengthen voter education and civil society participation in the electoral process."

(Further, if asked)

Q: Do you view the elections as credible or as truly free and fair?

A: This is a judgment for the people of the Philippines to make, notably through the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), the COMELEC-accredited Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), and other civil society organizations.

